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## **Morris dancers, matriarchs and paperbacks:**

### **Doing the village in contemporary Britain**

#### **Abstract**

To call a place rural is to categorise it as a particular kind of place and, often, to presume that particular kinds of being innately occur there. Over the past twenty years, however, trends in British rural studies have problematised easy ascription; this article is an ethnographic contribution within those trends. If it is no longer adequate to read the rural as a container for *being*, then, as I contend here, rurality can be explored anew through *doing*. I draw upon David Matless' (1994) frame of 'doing the village' representationally, and amplify it to include concepts of place as representational and relational. I thus use 'doing' to read the multiple ways in which diverse residents in a Northern England village engage with both their real locality and with nationally shared rural imaginings.

#### **Keywords**

rurality, rural studies, Britain, place

## **Introduction**

It was a summer's afternoon and I had spent much of the day pretending to be a tree sprite. I was dressed in morris dancing garb, a floral crown atop my plaited hair, and I was walking home to the village where I lived. Halfway uphill, I passed a pair of walkers strolling down. They stared; they grinned. "This is why I love England," one said to the other.

Fluttering ribbons and leaves, I probably did look as though I had stepped from an English folk ballad (or even the Olympics opening ceremony). Though, doubtless the strollers would have been surprised to learn that this vision of Englishness was an Antipodean anthropologist amidst her fieldwork.

A few months earlier I had been visited in the field by an anthropologist colleague from my Australian university. Stopping by en route to a conference, he had parked his rental car in my farmyard, leapt out and breathlessly announced: "Down the road! There's a farmer in a flat cap mending a dry stone wall while wearing clogs! If you go now, you can probably still catch him!"

The 'farmer', I explained, was my Royal Air Force retiree neighbour; he got out of the house by helping a friend out with her cows. And, he'd bought the clogs for comfort while once jobbing on a factory floor processing Australian tea tree oil.

One more story. I met a publisher at an event in a nearby town. He was fascinated by my research and saw paperback potential for my ethnographic endeavours. Could I, he asked, “write up one of those comic rural studies”?

Though this article is *not* a comic rural study, perhaps these three tales show a certain surreal comedy in studying rural Britain. I’ve begun with the tales partly to draw attention to how pervasive particular images of rural life in Britain<sup>1</sup> are. As the archetypal rural settlement, the village suggests a predictably particular social ground: in Britain, it evokes a shared imagining of soil and soul, and I introduce its terrain in my first section below. As durably present and culturally meaningful as it is inaccessibly fictive, this ‘imagined village’ nourishes expectations of and shapes understandings about actual, existing, villages.

If, as I go on to consider, such imaginings puddle in the lanes of actual villages, they have been traipsed through by ethnographers, too. Earlier generations of scholars often saw villages as isolable containers for authentic communal being; later writers debunking the ‘rural idyll’ could readily replace one essentialism with another. How, then, might contemporary ethnographers engage with the interplay between actual and imagined villages *without* fixing a ‘real’ rural or presuming a particular rural being? The

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<sup>1</sup> Though I think that the rural imaginings I discuss here are largely English (and specifically Southern English), their influence can be considered in Britain and in British ethnographies more broadly.

path I pursue in this article is to follow trends in rural studies away from classic conceptions of what the rural *is* and towards *how* rurality happens. Centrally, I attend to how rural residents are, as David Matless (1994) puts it, 'doing the village'.

'Doing', as I conceptually extend it here, is an ongoing process, and it happens both representationally and relationally. Doing is thus dynamic, individual and ever incomplete. While, then, each of the stories I've told above involves unpicking a rural trope, I do not intend this as an invalidation; doing is not a matter of (in)authenticity but, I argue, the very means by which rural places are shaped and experienced. I amplify this argument in the substantive portion of this article, where I turn to more tales from my West Yorkshire fieldwork. Through three sections, I group together diverse doings to illustrate how – sometimes playfully, sometimes unexpectedly – villages are lived with and through. I introduce the couple who lived in a village that they insisted wasn't; through the village green and the local morris dancers I explore two real rural fakes; last, I consider two local residents who tangled belonging. All these examples show the twists and twines of imagination and experience. By using 'doing' to portray their fluidity, I ultimately depart from classic claims for what a village must be and hold; such a solidifying desire is, paradoxically, the work of the imagined village, to which I first turn.

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I use 'British' rather generically in this article - with the post-referendum caveat that there is a developing

## **Imagining the village**

As I suggested through my introductory vignettes, to research in rural Britain is always, in some way, to contend with conceptions of what rural Britain *is*. And, these are conceptions shared and navigated by scholars and the public alike. Through them, that the rural is identifiable and what it is spatially defined by typically appear straightforward: an imagery of field, farm and village. Ronald Blythe (1969:16-17), for example, stamped Akenfield as quintessentially rural when he described it as: “A tall old church ... a pub selling the local brew, a pretty stream, a football pitch ... a school with jars of tadpoles in the window, three shops with doorbells, a tudor mansion, half a dozen farms and a lot of quaint cottages”. But, mere materiality is a masquerade here: this evocative imagery carries particular – and particularly cultural – representations of what rural places and rural lives look like. Such representations have centuries-long roots in Britain (e.g. Bunce, 1994; Williams, 1973) and twine through a national 'psychic economy' (Burchardt, 2002). For John Rennie Short (1991), there is a nationally 'imagined country'; for Georgina Boyes (1993) and David Matless (1994) – and I will follow their naming – it can be described as an 'imagined village'.

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research agenda on Englishness (e.g. Kenny, 2014; Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2013).

Not a single place or even a series of places, the imagined village is a bevy of ideas, dreams and discourses, located elsewhere and out of time. Fundamentally, it works to “tell us what we think we have lost or point to what we think we have surpassed” (Nadel-Klein, 1995:110), and in this it is an intriguing by-product of the industrial revolution. Though rural representations were long extant (Williams, 1973), it was as industrialism coalesced in Britain that an elegiac vision of the rural past gained resonance as a potent foil to the present (Newby, 1987; Williams, 1973).

Fascinatingly, it was industrial-era elegy that prompted the first coordinated effort in British rural ethnography: the British Association for the Advancement of Science's 1893-99 national ethnographic survey (James Urry, 1984). Much like the near-contemporaneous folk revival (Boyes, 1993), the survey emerged from fears that urban industry was eroding rural tradition (James Urry, 1984). Its fieldworkers located salvageable authenticity in villages envisioned as bounded and anachronistic; “It was often stated,” writes James Urry (1984:92) in his account of the survey, “that a place was distant from “civilization,” or that its inhabitants were “untravelled,” or “suspicious of outsiders,” or “conservative,” or “behind the times,” or had been “stationary for generations””. These statements indicate how particular ways of being were literally fixed in rural space – and, for these originary ethnographers, the more apparently fixed a place and its people, the more worthy of study they became.

What was happening here was not so much observation as it was the transposition of the imagined village into ethnographic fact. This has proved a lingering tendency in British rural ethnography, where researchers often enter the field with questions and concerns already shaped by its rural definition. The potential troubles with this are amply illustrated by community studies. Animated by assumptions of autochthonous rural being (Nadel-Klein, 1995) and abetted by structural-functionalist frameworks (Newby and Bell, 1971), community studies emphasised internal harmony (Wright, 1992) and externalised change (Cole, 1977; Nadel-Klein, 1995). At once seeking and finding *gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1957 [1912]) in the British village, the result was a ballad of rooted rural belonging amidst the post-war clamour of urban change (e.g. Frankenberg, 1957, 1967; Rees, 1950).

While the strident 1970s critiques of community studies (Wright, 1992) stymied certain forms of rural research, a developing critical awareness opened new avenues. Howard Newby's (1979, 1987) 'rural idyll' critique was especially significant in rural studies, where it has continued to resonate (e.g. Horton, 2008; B Short, 2006; Walker, 2002; Wallwork and Dixon, 2004). Rather than a romance of “calendars and chocolate-box lids” (1979:14), Newby pointed to the unpleasant realities of inequality, class and cowshed stink. In anthropology, Anthony Cohen's edited volume *Belonging: Identity and Social Organisation in British Rural Cultures* offered a manifesto for an



ethnography of locality, charged with exploring “how people experience and express their difference from others” (Cohen, 1982a:2). Cohen's (e.g. 1982b, 1985) particular contribution was to consider communal boundaries as symbolic rather than concrete, and this has prompted further analysis of how local distinctiveness is produced and mobilised in contemporary Britain (e.g. Nadel-Klein, 1991). Both of these approaches lay a groundwork for reading rurality through representation and construction.

However, neither approach is without flaw. A generation of rural idyll scholarship has shown how simple it is to dissolve the imagined village in insalubrious reality; but, the ongoing usefulness of mere reality checking is doubtful – and the trouble with debunking is that it readily replaces one essentialised rurality with another, as though there is a 'real' or 'true' rural to uncover. Foregrounding the falseness of idyllic representations can also downplay the ways in which these might constitute or provoke actual engagements with place (Matless, 1994), and I will return to this in the following section. While, on the other hand, localist ethnography can work with construction, the genre's requisite emphasis on locals and belonging can rapidly set as concrete (Knight, 1994). By being ascribed difference and rootedness (Knight, 1994), locals slip into the role of the classic anthropological 'native' - “not only persons who are from certain places, and belong to those places, but ... also those who are somehow *incarcerated* ... in those places.” (Appadurai, 1988:37, original emphasis).

By taking a historical perspective in this section, I have indicated how the imagined village poses an ethnographic problem. It is a twofold problem. First, the green pastel tones of the imagined village are nationally shared idea(l)s, both durable and salient. To study rurality is thus a tricky matter of, as David Matless (1994:84) cautions, 'approaching' something already speaking'. Second, vociferous village ideas have a habit of influencing research by providing a pre-existing template for rural places and people. Through the twentieth century, 'rural' hasn't just had a public meaning, but a scholarly one, too. 'Let's do away with rural', Keith Hoggart (1990) has provoked: the category lumps together and obfuscates. Yet, though I have sympathies with Hoggart's argument, rurality is clearly too tenacious to be simply abandoned. Rurality, after all, is a key category of modern understanding – and one in which research informants are likely to participate. The central question, I think, for contemporary British rural ethnography is thus: how to move from research encounter to ethnographic illustration in ways that neither replicate village imaginings nor dismiss them?

### **Doing the village**

Though ethnographers are no longer tugging their boots on to explicitly seek order and communal cohesion in the village, rurality certainly remains to be contended with. The broad church of rural studies has undergone a long-term shift away from classic

conceptions of rural space as categorical and functional (Cloke and Thrift, 1994; Woods, 2012), and this in itself provides new possibilities for ethnographic engagement. Yet, the more that the complexities tangling through rural places are acknowledged, the less straightforward the ethnographer's task becomes. What does – or might – it mean to be doing rural ethnography in Britain today?

The first issue is one of definition: if rural is no longer a distinct spatial category, then what is it that makes a rural ethnography? I do think that there can be a nod to governmental classification – and the district where I have researched (and will introduce below) is municipally organised into rural parishes around hub villages. But, where rurality captures my attention is not that *is* a village, but that residents engage with its 'village-ness'. They are not *being* villagers, in the manner of being particular kinds of people who inhabit a particular kind of place; rather they are, as David Matless (1994) puts it, *doing* the village.

Matless (1994) uses 'doing the village' as a means to explore post-war non-fiction writing about rural places in Britain. Writing, he considers, rather than simply recording, 'does': it shapes, articulates and amplifies. Further, such 'doing' displays diverse imaginings, idiosyncrasies and agendas. I want to retrieve Matless' analysis from the page, here, and make of 'doing' a practical concept. That is, 'doing the village' describes practices that are engaged in by village residents and that are representational,

processual and relational. I will look briefly at each of these elements before giving them ethnographic illustration.

That rurality is representational is now a well-established scholarly understanding (e.g. Halfacree, 1993, 1995; O Jones, 1995). My niggle, however, is that this engenders a tendency to survey specific groups – second home owners (Halfacree, 2012), for example, or clergy (Walker, 2002) – as though representing rurality is a specialty of middle class incomers, “while other residents simply exist” (Matless, 1994:8). *All* residents, however, make and use representations of what rurality is and should be.

Rural representations are not a veneer on the real, but a part of the lived processes that give places coherence. Indeed, places, as Doreen Massey (2005) reconceptualises them, are in ongoing process and thus never finished, static forms. An important point to emphasise here is that any place (or any village) is “a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey, 2005:130): there is process, but there is not a singular production that all residents 'do' in the same ways (cf. Cohen, 1982a).

Geographical ideas of process, multiplicity and interconnection, *contra* fixity (Bell and Osti, 2010), inform an approach lately termed 'relational rurals' (Heley and L Jones, 2012). This entails an understanding that places are not points (Doel, 1999) but a mesh of relations: to and from other places, with and between people and things. From a

similar standpoint, I have argued elsewhere (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2014) for ethnographic attention to movement *in, through* and *of* villages. Thinking relationally opens up a breadth of possibilities for exploring rurality ethnographically.

'Doing the village', as I will use it here, is thus a short-hand for the complex and multiple ways that people engage with and through rurality. By doing through representations, with relations and in an ongoing process, people make sense of rurality; indeed, they make rurality. In the remainder of this article, I shall illustrate the varieties of doing the village by turning to my own fieldwork in Northern England.

### **Introducing Lyng Valley**

For twelve months during 2011-12 I lived as an embedded field researcher in a small district of West Yorkshire, Northern England. The district I call 'Lyng Valley'<sup>2</sup> sits in the rugged *Wuthering Heights*-esque (Brontë, 2000 [1847]) landscape of the South Pennine ranges. With a population of some 7,000 spread between the valley town of Dalebrig (pop. 4,000) and five upland civil parishes, Lyng Valley is mostly subsumed under a much larger regional authority centred in Muchbrough (pop. 100,000), eight miles distant. Roughly an hour's travel to the west is the postindustrial urbanism of Manchester, while the conurbation of Leeds and Bradford lies equidistant to the east.

I lived in Snay Top (pop. 700), an upland village near the moorland edge. The surrounding parish is dotted by doughty farmsteads and most of the land area is uninhabited; the mail arrives by four wheel drive and so did the local Methodist minister. My activities and sociality led me throughout the district: to participant-observation at formal events, organised groups, religious services and other social occasions; to semi-structured and unstructured interviews in residents' homes and a small number of outdoor 'walking interviews' (Evans and P Jones, 2011). I became a morris dancer, a fell runner and a chapel-goer; more broadly, I engaged in learning to live (Harvey, 2011) and act (Kohn, 2002) in the local context – and my overseas origins encouraged others to teach me (see also Degnen, 2012). The scope and method of my inquiry has been particularly influenced by the contemporary renewal of an anthropology of Britain (Rappport, 2000), rooted in the discipline's immersive research tradition and ethnographically attentive to broad-ranging social, experiential and structural concerns (e.g. Dawson, 2002; Degnen, 2012; Edwards, 2000; Gray, 2011; Pearson, 2012; Rappport, 1993). I locate myself here within critiques of bounded culture (e.g. Okely, 1996) and within the geographical sensitivities to the shifts of space and place that I have noted in the section above.

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2 I follow common ethical practice in the ethnography of Britain by using pseudonyms for both places and people.

As Doreen Massey (1991, 1993, 2005) describes, a place's distinctiveness is *produced*, not inherent. Lyng Valley today has been produced by the textiles that began to be woven there in the medieval era. Upland villages, like Snay Top, were long dominated by a dual economy of handloom weaving and small-scale farming. Later, the South Pennines region became an early hub of the textile industry. Though that industry is now some forty years dead, its legacy lurks: mill chimneys are as monumentally visible as cenotaphs, and the last generation of industrial workers are now bus pass - toting pensioners. What I find fascinating about Lyng Valley is that its (post)industrialism precludes it from classic rural categorisation; rurality and industry have so often been evoked as poles – the mill chimney held spatially and symbolically distinct from the sheep's graze – that they seem to cancel each other out. Yet, in Lyng Valley rural aspects and industrial reminders overlap: the district is an amalgam of both. For me, this blending is a salient reminder that the rural is not a simple spatial category – and it thus provides the stepping off point for my exploration of how Lyng Valley's residents interact with rurality. Across the following three sections, I show how different residents 'do' the village: comprehending, navigating, disputing, performing.

### **The village that wasn't**

I have earlier noted that the imagined village shapes expectations of what and how an actual village *should* be. Living in an actual village can prompt particular reflection on this - sometimes, as I will illustrate here, in surprising ways. I was certainly surprised when Clogger McGinty told me, insistently, that he did *not* live in a village. Clogger, a former industrial electrician, lived near me in Snay Top – why, in Clogger's reckoning, wasn't Snay Top a village?

Perhaps part of the answer rested in Clogger's sitting room. His wife Lottie had collected Rebecca Shaw's long-running (1995-present) series of paperback novels set in the fictional village of 'Turnham Malpas' and Clogger read them, too. Arrayed along the bookshelf, their spines displayed titles like *Talk of the Village*, *The Village Show*, *Scandal in the Village* and *A Village in Jeopardy*: not simply novels but explicitly *village* novels with titles suggesting the fecund plot ground of an insular village setting. The pastel covers evoke a further, familiar imagery: for *Whispers in the Village*, a watercolour image depicts a low stone bridge over a sleepily rippling river; a couple stroll arm-in-arm away from a cluster of thatch-roofed cottages, while in the background a church steeple emerges from amidst a green grove and a few birds flap through a serenely blue sky. The plots and dramas of Shaw's novels speak to an enclosed village sociality in which people are closely tied together, their intertwined lives played out at sedate pace. Love affairs, arguments and accidents plot and



punctuate an otherwise gentle rhythm of life; tug at one character and the others are pulled about in turn. The jacket blurb for *The Village Show* (1997), for example, explains that:

Newcomer to the village Craddock Fitch is keen to make a splash by holding a village show - the best ever - in the grounds of his large house. Committee secretary and co-ordinator of the show Louise Bissett is the spoilt daughter of Sir Ron and Lady Sheila. Although a brilliant organiser, Louise is in deep personal trouble - and her growing obsession with Peter Harris, the married rector, can only end in tears. As the weeks roll by into summer and nerves tighten in anticipation of the great day, romances heat up and then cool down, tempers flare and misunderstandings multiply ... all relayed daily in the gossipy atmosphere of Jimbo Charter Plackett's village store.

The country show, the local gentry, the Church of England, the papers-and-gossip shop and the ambitious incomer: these are ingredients of the imagined village. The plot fits coherently and resonantly together because it is, effectively, known already.

“What makes a village?” I asked Clogger, as we sat together in the sitting room, looking out at a neighbouring field of strutting chickens and sauntering sheep. He explained (in the bemused tone he reserved for my anthropological questionings) that a

village was smaller than a town but bigger than a hamlet. If, he continued, a town, such as Dalebrig, was somewhere that one would go to shop, a hamlet would not have shops or facilities at all, and a village would provide merely for its residents. Clogger then listed a village's facilities: a post office, a school, a church or chapel. There would probably be a pub too, he allowed, and perhaps even a cricket pitch or bowling green. Considering this answer, I commented that Snay Top must surely be a village since it ticked all the boxes: a pub, a post-office-cum-general-store, a two-classroom primary school, a cricket club, a Methodist chapel and a bowling green. But Clogger shook his head. He was adamant that Snay Top was *not* a village. It might have all the right facilities, he reasoned, but these did not cohere into a singular village community: “Them at the bowling club, they stick together ... them at the cricket club ... them that go in the pub ... the school lot and what have they at the community centre [run in the bowling clubrooms] ... always doing their own things, their own crowds. You'll not see them in chapel, neither.”

Clogger's musings on the multiple, satellite groups in Snay Top drew Lottie into the conversation. She was sure that the disparateness had been a recent development and that Snay Top had been different, “in olden times ... maybe when my mother was a little girl.” Then, shortly before the First World War, Lottie was convinced that local residents had done things together and Snay Top *had* been a village. But Clogger still

disagreed. “No, it never would have been like that,” he insisted. The couple fell to bickering. “See,” Clogger turned to me with some reproach, “you'll make us fight, now.”

Both Clogger and Lottie *knew* what made a village. They understood a village's ingredients as clear and recognisable; one would know whether one was in a village or not. Yet, Snay Top's status perturbed them and prompted their contention – they found themselves living in a village that wasn't. As they diagnosed and disputed, Clogger and Lottie were doing the village.

Partly, Clogger and Lottie were assessing a real village via an imagined one. They drew upon representations to define an essential 'village-ness', which they then related back to their own relational experience of Snay Top. Clogger used the contrast of his experience with his expectations to disqualify Snay Top from village-ness; Lottie could locate village-ness in a Snay Top of the past beyond her experience and affixed, in turn, to imaginings of her mother's childhood. In such ways, doing the village could also mean denying the village.

In his answer to me, Clogger had begun by listing the physical features of a village, but it was actually the relations within a place that he saw as most significant. In this, he imagined the village as close-knit and communal. But, more so, both Clogger and Lottie characterised and castigated village relations in response to their own

concerns. As teetotal Methodists, Clogger and Lottie would never venture into Snay Top's pub. Meanwhile, their beloved chapel was in disrepair; the congregation of eight battled bills and related awkwardly to an absentee minister. Behind their disapproval of Snay Top's clustered relations lurked, I suspect, their desire for a shared morality that would spurn the pub and fill the pews – or at least save the chapel from closure. Turnham Malpas, with its beacon-like steeple and embedded Rector, had a faithful village-ness; Snay Top did not. Thus, in doing the village, Clogger and Lottie were navigating between the hopes that they had, the things that they feared, the actual place where they lived and the kind of place they ideally imagined.

### **Improper morris dancers and a real fake village green**

After asking Clogger McGinty, “What makes a village?”, I put the same question to local historian Erik Trundle. Every village worthy of the name, Erik enthusiastically replied, needed a village green. This was a feature that Snay Top indeed possessed. The green – as it was always locally described though no sign named it – was an oddly shaped patch of land between the main road and the old Co-Operative building. It was replete with wobbling football goal, a creaking set of swings, a park bench and a dog waste bin.

In 2012, the green was the awning-dotted site of an especially celebratory effort in doing the village: Snay Top's Queen's Jubilee Fete. There was a children's parade, sack races and other games; there was a Women's Institute cake stall and a jumble sale run by Lottie McGinty to benefit the chapel; there was a pensioners' strawberry tea in the nearby bowling clubrooms; there were speeches and an award for the parish's eldest resident (the recipient was mildly perturbed since she wasn't). It could almost have been the Turnham Malpas village show – but rather than placid pastels it was a Pennine scene of bluster, chill and threatening cloud cover.

Although Erik considered a green typical of a village, he was bemused that one existed in Snay Top. “You don't get village greens in the Pennines!” he told me, emphasising with his historian's concern for accuracy that the green wasn't very accurate at all. “You get them down South where they have the weather for it. Up here, well, you'll occasionally see some poor kid trying to kick a football about in the wind.” Erik explained to me that the land for the green had been purchased in the 1950s. At the same time, a small cluster of council pre-fab houses were built nearby, and the green was probably intended as recreational space for the residents. Laughing heartily, Erik proclaimed that, because of the 'fake' green, Snay Top surely qualified as “the only authentic English village in the Pennines.”

Erik's laughter came in response to the imagined village's typically Southern English character. Just as the wind, rain and wrath of the Pennines made the Jubilee Fete a brave affair, it does not make for thatched roofs, blooming cottage gardens or peaceful strolls. Historically, too, Lyng Valley was never a region of the squire and parson alliance: the rugged land is so agriculturally marginal that the privileged never wanted to live on it, and the rich could not profit from it. The green is a transplant from an alternate rurality, quite literally out of place.

The green, in its rural artifice, is the sort of location that the Dalebrig Hell's Wellies enjoyed performing at. Based out of a Dalebrig pub called The Barge Pony, the Wellies are the local morris dancing 'side'. Still going strong as they round out their first decade, they are a familiar sight at local events and also perform at folk festivals further afield.

(Re)emerging in the rural salvage of the folk revival (Boyes, 1993), morris dancing is certainly *of* the imagined village. It is also commonly considered “the preserve of ageing, bearded eccentric men” (Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2013:18). The Hell's Wellies, however, are women, and they invert 'traditional' white morris costumes by wearing dark, deep colours instead. Though they draw their dances from the folk canon, gender playfully animates their performances. One dance begins with the rhyming: “Where, oh, where has my Dalebrig lover gone? He's gone to The Pony with

his frilly knickers on!"; when they participated in a folk parade, the pop song 'Single Ladies' became their marching refrain "All the jingle ladies" (referencing morris dancing's bells). Rehearsals I attended were enlivened with comic plots to replace the hankies dancers wave with dishcloths and oak staves with mops. The Wellies were boisterous amidst their ribbons and flowers, with one festival brochure describing their gleeful impropriety as "the scourge of cider vendors everywhere."

Like the out-of-place green, the Wellies' dance style is a Southern transplant. There are forms of morris from Northern England the Welsh borders, but the Wellies perform dances from the Cotswolds. In tourist advertising, Cotswold villages (replete with thatch and green) appear as quaint, rural archetypes. Why had the Wellies relocated this style to the Pennines? When I asked, I was laughingly told that their first dance teacher – the landlord at The Pony – was originally from 'down South' and had only known Cotswold steps; it was their own inauthentically authentic tradition.

The pub landlord and the council estate: Cotswold morris and the village green have prosaic origins as Pennine transplants. Yet to debunk them as 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm, 1983) would be to miss their sometimes conscious, often incidental, always incremental 'doing'. As Erik chuckled at the green's authenticity, he was knowingly doing the village; particularly, he drew subversive attention to the ways in which rural representations privilege some kinds of place over others. Whereas Clogger

and Lottie had disqualified Snay Top from 'village-ness', Erik used rural imaginings for creative qualification. Similarly, the Hell's Wellies did the village by embracing a particular kind of folk tradition while at the same time subversively unstitching it.

Though transplanted, the Wellies and the green were far from alien. Both were being woven into the local fabric, their doings (and, in the case of the green, doings on) a part of the ongoing process of making place. And, these were relational processes: the green, for example, had shifted from origins in post-war housing development through to a local celebration of an (inter)national monarchy. The Wellies, too, did not just do the village themselves but were brought into their audience's own doings: witnessed, applauded, photographed. The real fake village green and the improper morris dancers are not timeless elements of authentic rurality – but in their very fashioning they illustrate how no village is timeless. Their fakings and makings lead into my final ethnographic section.

### **Faking the farmer's wife and making the matriarch**

The green and the morris dancers' out-of-place origins bring into focus the question of what it might mean to be *in* place, anyway. In this section, I continue to reflect on that question, considering the reality of fakery and the fluidity of belonging, through the



plot-lines of a farmer's wife (who wasn't) and the bloodlines of a family matriarch (who was).

Heather was the most recognisable farmer's wife in Lyng Valley. “There goes Heather,” Lottie McGinty would say to me, if she saw her through the sitting room window, crossing the fields, or in the street as we drove by. But, Heather wasn't actually a farmer's wife – nor is she even called Heather. The woman Lottie pointed out was Kerry Van Sparkes; originally from Liverpool, she'd moved a few years previously to the district, where she plied a trade as a music teacher. She lived in a nondescript terrace in Snay Top, with her name and teaching credentials on a plate tacked to the gate. But, for Lottie, this was Heather's house and Kerry would always be Heather.

Several years ago, Heather, the farmer's wife, had been a character in a village-based television series, and Kerry was the actress who had played her. Though the series had long ended and Kerry had changed career, she was the closest Snay Top had to celebrity and would thus keep being remembered for her 'real villager' screen role.

Lottie did not know Kerry personally, but she *knew* Heather. And, though I was acquainted with Kerry and periodically chatted with her in the pub (where she indicated her own boredom with reprising Heather), Lottie had little interest in the personality behind the screen character. Just as Lottie liked to recount to me stories of district marriages, past chapel events and sundry gossip, she enjoyed re-telling Heather's plot-

lines, smiling at tender moments and tutting at drama. If, for Lottie, Snay Top was not a village, then it seemed that through Kerry/Heather the village had come to Snay Top.

Heather belonged to Snay Top through her screen familiarity. In British rural ethnography, belonging has been more commonly reckoned through kinship (e.g. Cohen, 1982b, 1987; Gray, 2011; Strathern, 1982a): one belongs because one's family belongs. Durable kinship connections are indeed evident in Lyng Valley. Deriving from pre-industrial farmsteads in the region, a cluster of 'locative'<sup>3</sup> surnames are extant, recognisable and well-known. The Blacksteads<sup>4</sup> were once jokingly described to me as a Lyng Valley 'tribe' – but who is behind a name? At 78, village resident Joyce Blackstead was a matriarch to her branch of the family. She was a great-grandmother; 'Nan' to a widening circle. She was woven tightly into her own peer group, whether knitting at the Craft Circle, dropping in to the Baptist Church coffee morning or socialising on the bus. Joyce was also a repository of local stories and current gossip; for her, Lyng Valley was as full of memory as it was of family, and she herself belonged to it.

“Wuthering Heights!” Joyce would jovially proclaim in cold weather. But to listen to Joyce was to hear a very loud, very broad Cockney accent. Proudly born and

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<sup>3</sup> Locative surnames derive from place names (in contrast to, for example, surnames deriving from occupations such as Smith, Barker or Tanner).

<sup>4</sup> My pseudonyms must necessarily eliminate actual locative surnames.

raised in the East End of London, she told me: “I came here on holiday fifty years ago. Keep forgetting to go back!”

Marriages happen, migration moves on. And, while locative surnames connect to place, the people bearing them can, like Joyce, reasonably come from anywhere. While Joyce had married in to the Blacksteads, Sylvia Przemlicka had married out, meeting a post-war Polish migrant. Joyce melded Yorkshire and the East End; Sylvia's kinship connections splayed transnationally. Their lives both happened in the district and relationally interlaced with places elsewhere. Surnames do not brand 'locals' but flex around the people who bear them, carrying complex stories of how they move *through* places.

Lyng Valley residents do engage with and express belonging – and some certainly claim more of it than others. Rather than – as with community studies – reading belonging uncritically, as a kind of rural autochthony or an obdurate fact, later scholarly approaches have considered how belonging is attributed (e.g. Strathern, 1982b), constructed and enacted (e.g. Kohn, 2002). These considerations allow that people *feel* belonging, while equally asking *how* and *why*. They suggest, too, that there is no uniform answer to either question. Similarly, Paul Barker's (2012) recent social history of a small South Pennines town is subtitled 'A Sense of Belonging'; that it is a sense – not a fact – is significant. Belonging only masquerades as a static, self-evident

category; as Peter Adey (2006) points out, such seeming 'moorings' (Hannam, Sheller and John Urry, 2006) are always relational. Kerry and Joyce could be painted as urban incomers and distanced from belonging, yet belonging was attributed to Kerry and it was felt by Joyce. Can a proud Cockney be a Yorkshire matriarch? Can an actress become imbued with village identity? These are questions not of being but of *doing*.

Kerry had represented rurality on screen, and she was doing the village in a different way as she retreated to a (she hoped incognito) life in Snay Top. Lottie responded to those earlier screen representations as she felt the frisson of Heather's 'village-y' residence, and her doing here interlaced with her own ambivalent relationship towards the village that wasn't. Joyce, meanwhile, had been on a rural holiday for fifty years, and her doing, just as she felt belonging, was an ongoing process of inhabiting a place she 'kept forgetting' to depart from. These are diverse doings, twining representations, relations and processes – which brings me to some final thoughts.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In Snay Top, it is probably raining. Post-war council pre-fabs overlook the bowling green and a mothballed mill chimney overlooks everything. Recently closed, the Methodist chapel bears a 'For Sale' sign. Polish surnames jostle with locative. Children,

grown, decamp to cities and commuting professionals move in. Tesco vans ply the lanes and zumba aerobics blares from the cricket clubrooms.

I *could* use this hardly idyllic village-scape to rehash a story of the death of rural Britain; I could lament the loss of local institutions, the stretching and staining of the village fabric, the dilution of belonging and the imposition of change. I could do so rather easily because the plot already exists: the village, imagined as homely, authentic and good, has been an elegiac foil to modern concerns since the industrial revolution. Fanciful as they are, these are ideas that matter. They matter on a national scale and prompt personal navigations: people imagine, engage with and, indeed, experience rurality. As I have considered in this article, the task of rural ethnography in contemporary Britain requires attending to both village imaginings and real rural 'doings'. Yet, the imagined village has mattered, too, for the past ethnographers who have sought folk, fixity, community and belonging within village bounds. Thus the contemporary ethnographic task demands something of a pirouette in wellington boots: we must illustrate the fluidity of rural places while also interacting with earthy images and folk desires, and deftly avoiding imagined village dalliances of our own.

Whereas concerned ethnographic surveyors and earnest community studies scholars once saw rural *being* as the fixed phenomenon of rural spaces, thus treating a spatial category as a container for preordained social patterns, I have followed

contemporary currents in rural studies to explore rural *doing* as an alternative frame. Drawing on David Matless' (1994) notion of 'doing the village', I have considered doing as an interaction between individuals and representations, and, by transposing the concept from the page to place, I have drawn attention to the connected dimensions of process and relations. Doing, as I have outlined it, is a constant process, neither beginning in an 'authentic' village of the past nor ceasing in future definition; doing goes on. Doing is also relational – a concept that is being increasingly developed in recent literature, and that draws attention to the contingent shaping of place. Far from reproducing rural stasis, the ideas that I have considered here prompt ethnographic encounters with villages that are understood as mottled and mercurial, fluid and surprising.

A relational approach also allows for attention to individual experience. The Lyng Valley residents whom I have profiled in this article come from an *Akenfield*-esque (Blythe 1969) mix of backgrounds. They make for a diverse snapshot of contemporary British rural life; if the imagined village is populated by particular kinds of people, real villages are less homogeneously predictable. As Nigel Rapport (2000:21) has written of studying Britain, “all of human life is there”. In illustrating how diverse people do the village in Snay Top, I have shown how rural representations are played against local realities – and how they can be enacted playfully. I have shown how

people play rural characters and give rural characters real lives; inhabiting multiplex identities, they shape their own sense of belonging, not so much in as *through* place. If people live *with* imagined villages and *through* actual villages, then, I believe, the ability to show them playfully, perplexingly *doing* both is an ethnographic strength. Here, I have illustrated just this – allowing my informants' imaginings, realities, contradictions and curiosities to share space on the page just as they jostle through experience. These doings are fluid, as people and places are. This is not a reassuringly concrete research agenda; 'What is left?' some might ask, as the relational rural billows beyond pinpointing range. What is left are imaginative realities: the very substance of ethnographic encounter.

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